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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical review of new approaches to genre, including the process, workshop, communication, and traditional approaches, and asks what English teaching can learn from them amidst ongoing debates about repertoire, multiliteracies, and the influence of new technologies. It argues that a flexible, participatory and critical view of genre offers ways of seeing writing as a social and personal activity and provides a basis for discussing difference, similarity, and change in all kinds of texts and text-making. The paper concludes that seeing genres in terms of dialogue rather than transmission, and as negotiated social practices rather than fixed rhetorical forms, offers positive alternatives. (Contains 59 references.) (EF)

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by Rob Oliver

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Another Look at Genre in the Teaching of Writing

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A revised version of a paper presented at the IFTE conference, 'The Power of Language' , Warwick, July 1999

Introduction

It has been difficult to avoid the word 'genre' in literacy and language education in recent years, particularly concerning the teaching of writing. New ways of looking at genre, traditionally a way of classifying texts with common features or purposes, have been emerging in different educational contexts. Composition and rhetoric studies in North America (Miller, 1984, 1994; Devitt, 1993; Freedman and Medway, 1994a, 1994b; Berkinkotter and Huckin, 1995; Bishop and Ostrom, 1997); literacy research and primary education in Australia (Christie, 1986; Martin et al, 1987; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Martin, 1993; Richardson, 1994; Wyatt-Smith, 1997); literacy projects in the U.K. (Wray and Lewis, 1995, 1997); the teaching of academic literacy (Johns, 1997); and the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Rubin, 1996) are all examples of areas which have drawn on the concept of genre as something more than a formal device for classifying texts.

In this paper I offer a critical review of some of these new approaches to genre and ask what English teaching can learn from them in the changing 'landscape of communication' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) and amidst ongoing debates about repertoire, multiliteracies, and the influence of new technologies (Kress, 1995; Tweddle et al, 1997). I argue that a flexible, participatory and critical view of genre offers us ways of seeing writing as both a social and personal activity and provides a basis for discussing difference, similarity and change in all kinds of texts and text-making.

Genre and the Teaching of Writing

Perhaps the earliest and most widely known genre initiative as far as classroom practice is concerned is that of the so-called 'genre school' in Australia (Reid, 1987) which directly influenced the way that writing is taught in some primary schools in the early 1990's and has since come to represent a dominant discourse of literacy education in some states, notably New South Wales. In these programmes a set of staged genres or 'text types' is explicitly taught in a three-phase pedagogy involving modelling, joint negotiation and independent construction (Wyatt-Smith, 1997). Texts used during the modelling phase are designed to exemplify the main linguistic forms of knowledge required for effective participation in school subjects (Derewianka, 1996).

This approach to genre, influenced by systemic-functional linguistics, emerged out of literacy research in primary schools in the 1970's and '80's. Researchers saw children doing a lot of personal and narrative but very little factual and expository writing. It was claimed that a prevailing emphasis on personal 'creativity', 'originality' and 'authorship' in the teaching of writing tended to privilege narrative genres at the expense of other forms of writing, and therefore other ways of engaging with knowledge (Martin and Rothery, 1986). Genre programmes set out to remedy this imbalance in repertoire, to empower access to a wider functional range of texts. Teaching methods have favoured explicit presentation of text models and a highly visible, interventionist role for the teacher, who is expected to guide access to clearly distinguished linguistic structures (Martin et al, 1987).

Some have found this explicit and direct approach to genre somewhat formalist and transmission-oriented. Critics have claimed that it subordinates individual voices to pre-determined notions of genre, promoting an artificial, formulaic, even impersonal image of writing and language (Rosen, 1992; Stratta and Dixon, 1994). Much of the early criticism centred on the claim that genre approaches, despite their avowed social aims, become prescriptive and even authoritarian in practice (Barrs 1991). Sawyer (1995) detects in genre approaches a strong reaction against developmental, writing-for-learning models and identifies a conservative ideology behind the implementation of genre approaches in schools.

It would appear that the debate about genre in literacy became polarised in the early 1990's – 'whole language v. genre' or 'process v. genre' (Maybin, 1994) – and neglected to consider the role which genre-related activities, analysis and insights might play within adapted process (or other approaches) to writing, and the different ways in which genres might be introduced, explored and acted upon in the classroom. Explicit modelling of targeted textual structures is not the only way to apply genre theory or to study genres. Looked at internationally, contemporary debates on genre are diverse. There is clearly no single way of looking at genre and no single way of applying genre theory in teaching. It is clear that the early 'Sidney School' genre model, though interesting in many ways, represented only one view of genre in literacy education.

Recent research and practice has suggested ways of moving beyond a genre/process choice in the classroom. Increasingly complex ideas of how genre might play a role in literacy learning without reliance on text models to impart genre knowledge are emerging from work with learners of different ages in different contexts. For example, the EXEL (Exeter Extending Literacy) project in the UK has shown how scaffolding devices like writing frames can be used to help young writers to develop a sense of genre while drafting texts (Wray and Lewis, 1995, 1997). Such frames can be used as flexible and provisional forms of scaffolding. They need not impose a rigid, unchanging view of genre. They can be jointly constructed and revised by groups of learners to suit specific writing occasions. Envisaging a piece of writing at the planning stage may involve discussion of genre and may include learning from other texts. Similarly, anticipation of audience, of how a text is likely to be read in its social context, can lead to further consideration of genre during the drafting process. Wray and Lewis, whose work on writing frames and extending literacy has played a major role in developing genre-based approaches in the UK, have stressed throughout their work the need for flexibility and exploration in the reading and writing of genres.

Related work in educational linguistics on the dynamics of modelling and scaffolding alert us to the importance of dialogue in the classroom. Learning genres is not just a matter of assimilating linguistic knowledge from texts. It is clear that the kinds of dialogue and interaction which take place around text, the ways of 'talking into text' (Unsworth, 1997), contribute to understandings about genre in the classroom. Instead of presenting genres externally as 'required knowledge', Mackin-Horarik (1996) suggests that teachers need to build on the prior knowledge and experience of students and take into account differing perceptions of genres and contexts. This means considering learning contexts from more than one point of view and taking 'not just the pedagocentric view of the teacher and what is to be taught, but also that of the

learner and how this relates to what is already learnt' (p. 277).

In the very different setting of composition courses in the US, attempts have been made to integrate genre with process and workshop approaches. Brooke and Jacobs (1997) view genres as ways of constructing *identities* in writing. Genre becomes a site for 'identity negotiation' and the working out of writers' roles alongside the acquisition of textual conventions. Genre study and discussion are woven into the writing process, arising from writing activity rather than imposed on it. According to Brooke and Jacobs, 'given ownership of their writing, time, and support, most writing students will experiment widely with genre' (p. 220).

A similar importance is given to the interpersonal factors of role and identity by Ann Johns (1997), who has developed an exploratory, student-centred and 'socioliterate' approach to teaching genre as part of courses in academic literacy. In her approach students are asked to be researchers on genres as literacy practices, rather than apprentices to genres as received rhetorical forms. This involves students in reading everyday texts in terms of genre, interviewing people who regularly use a particular genre and collecting their own genre samples, as well as researching the genres required in their own academic writing. Learning to write therefore involves developing a broader 'socioliterate' awareness alongside specific skills and achievements.

In the field of teaching English for Specific Purposes, John Swales (1991) has developed a detailed approach to teaching one genre – the research article - as 'communicative event'. His model of the genre is based on a series of communicative actions or 'moves' (p. 141). Genres are seen as dynamic, as things that people *do* with language, as ways in which communication between readers and writers is set up in particular communities and situations. For Swales, the study of genres must explore the *rationale* behind dicourse conventions, not just present them as desirable 'skills'. Learning genres requires 'not only competence with the product but also a raised rhetorical consciousness' (p. 234). This way of thinking has been extended to other genres (Bhatia, 1993).

Meanwhile, research on the development of young children's writing offers us ways of looking at the interaction beween individual meaning-making and genres – how personal 'voices' draw on and accentuate the social 'voices' already inscribed in genres (Chapman, 1994). A rich and challenging range of texts in the classroom can make these 'social voices' accessible – through reading, research, analysis, and discussion – for developing writers to take up and 'ventriloquate' (Wertsch, 1991) in their own way in their own writing. Crucial to this interaction is children's ability to make links between reading and writing. Working in this way does not necessarily mean that students get stuck in one favourite, usually narrative genre. Genre can be seen as 'generative' (Himley, 1986) within an environment which explores diverse texts and situations. In this kind of classroom, genres are 'made', 'constructed'. They represent opportunities 'to create new situations, to learn new ways to make meaning, to interpret events and to *be*' (Himley, p. 157; see also Kress, 1997).

These diverse strands of research and practice point the way towards more complex and sensitive ways of looking at genre in teaching and learning. A single 'genre approach' seems unlikely, perhaps undesirable as a way of organising a curriculum. Certainly, teaching genre and teaching about genre are not incompatible with teaching writing as process. Working with genre does not mean the end of pre-writing, drafting or personal choice of topic. Nor does it necessarily signal the end of personal ownership, discovery and engagement in literacy pedagogy (Huggins, 1999). But it does mean *confronting the social in writing*. Taking genre into account means that the emphasis falls 'less on the cognitive relationship between the writer and the writer's internal world and more on the relationship between the writer and his or her ways of anticipating and countenancing the reactions of the intended readership' (Swales, 1991, p. 220). An emphasis on genre makes this aspect of writing– the outward, social aspect – more visible. In this sense,

genre can be seen as a powerful *dimension* of learning about writing, texts and social communication.

Genre, English and Repertoire

English teachers have been in the forefront of change in extending the range of genres in students' writing and reading. A visitor to a modern secondary English classroom is just as likely to see students scripting a radio play, word-processing a news report, or even designing a web site as writing a traditional essay. Textual repertoire within English has not only broadened but taken on a more social dimension, a central concern with real audiences and purposes. Some curriculum models have gone further, matching the broadening of repertoire with broader views of text itself, considering (for example) the importance of visual literacy within English (as in the New Zealand English Curriculum (NZ Ministry of Education, 1994)).

The advent of electronic writing spaces promises to broaden and diversify this range even further. Some acts of writing are becoming more like acts of design, with verbal, visual and aural text combining and traditional roles of reader/writer blurring at the edges. In addition, potential audiences for electronic texts are larger, more culturally diverse and more unpredictable than ever before. Some have painted a picture of brave new individualism in these digital textual spaces, each act of writing/reading taking a different journey (Bolter, 1991). Others predict the emergence of new shared textual practices, communities and conventions, with their own rhetorics and their own genres (see contributors to Snyder, 1998).

At the same time, in this context of change the pressure on teachers to continue to teach a traditional canon of relatively stable written genres (in addition to exploring new genres and new media) is considerable. There is a tension between an academic or *canonical* view of repertoire and a sociolinguistic or *pluralist* view. This tension is keenly felt in the context of standardised assessment, which tends to reinforce the hold of traditional and institutionalised genres (Farr and Nardini, 1996).

The range and flexibility of multimodal genre knowledge required of students both in and out of school is increasingly diverse and demanding. There is a danger of performance and productivity in a range of genres crowding out critical awareness of the dynamic social forces behind genres – their embeddedness in social contexts and communities, the multiple ways in which they can be constructed, renewed, interrelated, and the different stances towards genre conventions which individual writers (or 'designers') of texts might take up in different situations. Any itemised 'checklist' or set of approved genres drawn up to organise a writing curriculum in an attempt to 'cover' this diversity would prove inadequate and risk obscuring the importance of situation, change and the social construction of texts. This risk is heightened if a limited number of genres is analysed solely in terms of predicted verbal conventions and stages, in terms of the modelling and scaffolding of linguistic resources, without combining this activity with *reflection on the broader social dynamics of genre*. Recognising the multiplicities of genre – that genres are not always singular, predictable phenomena but are often characterised by diversity, change and conflict – is central to a critical view of genre (Devitt, 1996; Coe, 1994). In this view, reflection on alternatives, on change, on variation in genres is given high value and prominence in the process of learning to write.

Traditional views of literacy are based on notions of autonomous skills and predictable modes of discourse. Clearly the 'autonomous model' of literacy (Street, 1994), typically based on a closed set of genres, fails to account for the variety and proliferation of genres in 'the changing landscape of communication'. Differences between literacy practices, as revealed in the different genres which are valued and used in them, can become subjects of research and enquiry in the English classroom. But this means working with an open view of repertoire and a desire to encourage students to *reflect* on their own experiences of literacy and communication, and the way that those experiences relate to broader social factors. In this sort of classroom, 'no text is an island' (Widdowson, quoted in Johns, 1997). No text can be seen as autonomous

and free from the social and cultural factors that contribute to its production. Texts are interlinked, and one of the accessible frameworks of that interlinking is genre.

Ann Johns argues that genres should be studied as much more than schematic textual structures:

> If students can learn to view the various features of texts as purposeful rather than arbitrary, as situated and generic rather than autonomous, then they can begin to see how texts fit into a broader social context: of a classroom, a disciplinary community or a culture. They may also begin to understand how considering the social factors that influence texts can enhance their own task representation and processing (1997, p. 93)

Such a view of writing and reading rejects the isolation of texts, readers, writers as autonomous and self-dependent, and finds a purely cognitive, individualised perspective on the making of texts inadequate in the light of what Vygotsky (1978) calls the 'complex cultural activity' of writing. Texts grow as much from other texts, from discourses, from their embeddedness in social contexts and networks of communication, as they do from personal experience. These networks are shaped by social, cultural, historical and ideological factors. Providing *access* to these networks, these chains of communication, is a key motive behind genre-based approaches.

At the same time, it is clear that an emphasis on genre can degenerate into prescriptive, formalist, impersonal models of language and teaching. Repertoire can shrink and the 'generative' principle noted earlier can dry up. Genres can degenerate into monolithic sets of rules, with textual boundaries artificially enforced by prescriptive teaching and assessment . They can become cut off from the living processes of purpose, negotiation, innovation and style which sustain and renew them. The potential for reductive and impoverished views of genre in pursuit of a targeted range of text types is considerable, especially in a climate in which functional and utilitarian views of literacy seem to be as strong as ever (see contributors to Cox et al, 1998). There is a real danger of presenting what Harold Rosen calls 'the fixed world of genres' (1992). It is important to develop ways of thinking about genre which treat the relationship between individual action and generic traditions as flexible, negotiated, evolving and above all critical.

The Reconception of Genre as Social Action

Much of the research on literacy and composition which I referred to at the beginning of this paper has contributed to a reconception of the rhetorical concept of genre on social lines. Genres have been seen as integral to recurring situations (Miller, 1984) and social or social-semiotic processes (Kress and Knapp, 1994). A similar kind of re-appraisal has taken place in the study of literary genres (Cohen, 1991).

What has emerged from much of this research is a view of genre as dynamic, participatory, situated social action as opposed to static, abstract, decontextualised rhetorical form. Learning a genre, learning to inhabit its conventions and make use of them in the processes of making meaning, is not solely a matter of acquisition and instantiation of form. It is more a matter of engagement with established communities of discourse, of acculturation into conventions, and (crucially) *negotiations with them and transformations of them in practice*. In this view, genre knowledge can be seen as a form of 'situated cognition' (Berkinkotter and Huckin, 1995) and our knowledge of genre, rather than being fixed, as constantly updated by experience.

Moreover, genres themselves are fluid and combinatorial in nature – they are open to change and renewal. They are not insulated from each other, but are constantly borrowing, overlapping, interweaving, while retaining some degree of stability. They can be seen as 'social institutions that both shape and are shaped by individuals' communicative actions' (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992, p. 300). There are always repeated elements carried from text to text; but 'every situated text is a negotiated revision modified by the social forces in its particular context' (Johns, 1997. p. 41).

This emphasis on shaping and being shaped, on social context, on a dynamic interplay between negotiated and repeated elements, links this view of genre as social action with the structurationist theory of Giddens (1984). Larger social patterns are created, maintained and changed as a consequence of the myriad individual acts which establish, modify or subvert them in practice. This interactive process shapes conventions and communities of discourse which, though influenced by institutional roles and relations of power, are open to change and variation.

Charles Bazerman sums up one view of genre as social action:

> Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (1997, p. 19)

Written genres, then, can be seen as jointly constructed by readers and writers with shared social purposes. They develop on the basis of conventions over time and through recurring situations. These situations are influenced by social, cultural and institutional factors which, in the course of daily life, are largely tacit and unexamined, especially to those who are already practitioners of the genre and who have 'insider' knowledge of how it works. In educational contexts, gaining access to this 'insider' knowledge, to valued ways of using language and organising texts, could be seen as one of the keys to educational participation and success. As Carolyn Miller suggests, 'genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community' (Miller, 1994, p. 39).

But this participation is not just a matter of picking up certain skilled 'ways with words'. It is also about recognising, and to an extent sharing, the *values* of the genres used to map knowledge in particular contexts. This includes being aware of how writers conventionally represent – or absent – themselves, and position readers, in the genres concerned, and how much room there is for personal negotiation. The 'guideposts' of a genre can not therefore be mapped out in verbal features alone; roles and contexts shape the social meanings of a genre.

Genres, then, are more than just means of communication. They are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with personal meanings. They are not neutral or technical structures. They are ways of encoding experience, ways of seeing and knowing and being in language as well as ways of constructing relationships, communicating and getting things done. These 'ways of knowing' vary crucially according to social contexts and communities, as well as relations of power.

Individuals have the power to shape and renew genres; but in turn their actions are *shaped by* genre and its social forces. Bakhtin offers us important insights into this two-way, dialogic process. In Bakhtin's (1986) view, nobody re-makes a genre from scratch. Genres have 'relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*' (original italics, p. 78). However, individual actors have the power to 'accentuate' these forms and imprint them with personal style. The beauty of Bakhtin's vision is that it combines a view of relative stability of genre with a view of the worth, energy and power of individual action. The relationship between individual intentions and socially-shaped genres is not one of implementing a fixed code or schema. It is one of fluid participation and dialogue with living practices of communication. For Bakhtin:

> The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them .....the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication (p. 80)

Bakhtin, then, does not set up an opposition between individual 'voice' and social 'genre'. Instead, there is a relationship between the making of individual meaning or voice, and the meanings and voices already carried in genres. The relationship is characterised by *dialogue*. According to Bakhtin, genres are 'filled

with the echoes and reverberations of others' utterances':

> Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness', varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, re-work, and re-accentuate. (p. 89)

Our negotiations with genre can not avoid the potency of prior discourse, of voiced 'otherness' – the traces of those who have been there before us. This is not to deny the 'imprint of individuality', the 'our-own-ness', in the way we use a genre. The individuality of expression arises in the context of re-working, of re-accenting, the genre, and this can reflect a range of stances and attitudes. It could be said that genres have no meaning as static, fixed structures. As Terry Threadgold has written, genres:

> are always and only constructed and reproduced in texts as social processes, that is, as events, performances. They pre-exist any particular 'use' only as 'chunks' – familiar, taken for granted 'ways of speaking' – in other texts. (1989, p. 317)

Genre, therefore, does not mean that an individual writer's choices no longer matter or that working within a genre is destined to be uncreative. It does mean that those choices are to some extent constrained and shaped by the social-discursive processes at work in any given situation. Looking at genre reminds us that our texts are not isolated or autonomous. Rather, they are constructed. They form part of chains and networks of communication.

Studying Genres in the 'Socioliterate' Classroom

How can teaching take on board this view of genre as social action, what I shall call (after Ann Johns) a 'socioliterate' view of genre? How can the 'shaping forces' of genre – the forces of 'otherness' - be represented in the classroom without becoming frozen into prescriptive forms, and without losing sight of the individual – the forces of 'our-own-ness'?

I believe that there is value in making genre a talking point and focus for analysis in the secondary classroom, where a wide range of genres is encountered in reading and writing. Bringing genre more to the fore is one way of raising awareness of the inter-dependence of texts and how social practices and institutions can be seen as flexible and negotiated, rather than fixed and imposed. This means comparative and critical reflection on *difference* and *similarity* in a range of texts in a range of media. It also means encouraging students to reflect on their own experience of texts and communication.

Working with genres helps us to see the relationship between individual meanings and social forces as one of dialogue. This dialogue is characterised by participation, negotiation, 'accentuation', as well as by constraints and conventions. Access to this dialogue would be one of the aims of working critically with genre. 'Access to genres' is too often interpreted as access to the normative linguistic features of dominant academic genres. A rather instrumental, technical view of access results. Learning genres is too easily seen as a matter of assimilation rather than critical engagement. In this way, genre teaching can become a one-way transmission of pre-determined structures and verbal routines with heavy reliance on the authority of models ('maximally systematised' in the words of Paulo Freire (Freire and Machado, 1987)). Crucial issues of role, context and identity, which all have a bearing on genre in practice, can be obscured. Boundaries between genres can become artificially defined, stifling the links, borrowings, overlaps between genres – the work of intertextuality, of genres in 'performance'. Classroom exploration of genres, moving between reading and writing experience, needs to embrace issues of role and context as readily as verbal skills.

Genres can be seen as verbs rather than nouns, and as multiple rather than singular. What Terry Threadgold (1994) calls a 'multifunctional' approach to genre would take account of the dynamic ways in which genres

are 'performed' in practice. This means taking account in the classroom of multiplicity, change and the mixing of genres. The modelling of typical linguistic features and conventions of a single genre is still of great value in the teaching of writing. But a multifunctional and socioliterate approach would be interested in the potential for re-combination and change *as a central feature of study* alongside the learning of conventional and dominant forms. A broader view of access is therefore necessary – access to critical as well as normative knowledge; access to reflection as well as to performance; access to experiment as well as to convention (see Delpit, 1988).

I would like to conclude by briefly outlining some ways of working with texts in the classroom which I have found effective and which go some way towards developing the kinds of 'socioliterate' awareness of genre which I have been describing.

1. *Making links between reading and writing.*

Traditionally, reading and writing have been too often separated in curriculum models and classroom work. Assessment often enforces the divide. From a genre perspective this separation makes little sense. Genres are jointly constructed by readers and writers. Acts of writing borrow and re-combine language gleaned from reading. Encouraging students to make as many links as possible between their reading and writing in a particular genre, as well as between different genres, goes some way towards breaking down this artificial separation. This linking of knowledge can be encouraged as part of students' reflection on their own, and their peers', writing, and as part of general feedback on writing.

The problem with writing in school is that often students write in genres that they do not regularly *read* in the course of classroom life (van Peel, 1989). This is often the case with essays and assessment tasks like comprehension response. Audiences for these texts are usually limited to teachers and unknown assessors. The social life of these genres is severely limited, even though so much can depend on them. They are seen in a mainly cognitive way, devoid of the sort of communicative social purposes discussed earlier in this paper.

Learning to *read* such genres may give students clearer understanding of what is valued, and in turn enhance their command of the genres concerned, by setting up active correspondence between the genre-as-written and the genre-as-read. Such reading might also help to open up the often closed and mystified agendas of writing assessment. Rather than be given abstract lists of criteria for effective writing, students can develop genre knowledge which helps them to arrive at judgements in the contexts of reading.

2. *Learning to Read Texts Comparatively*

Samples of texts, rather than single models, can be used to encourage the kind of comparative and contrastive reading which helps to bring genre into view. Such reading observes the ways in which texts act out shared social and rhetorical purposes in different or similar ways. Intertextuality, the ways in which texts influence and borrow from each other, can become clearer in this kind of analysis.

Such samples can begin with everyday or 'homely' texts. Johns (1997) shows how studying a sample of wedding invitations can reveal the different ways in which a genre might be 'performed'. Issues of role and context, readership and identity, and the way individual personality infuses or 'imprints' genre can emerge from this sort of small-scale genre study. Johns provides a cross-cultural sample – another source of variation. Similar introductory work on 'small' genres can be done on news headlines, 'lonely hearts' ads and e-mail messages. Such genres may seem trivial at first, but can tell us a lot about the social construction of texts and the ways in which readers and writers are both positioned by conventions, and yet also able to influence and even change them. Such analysis can bring students up against their own

expectations of a genre and, through experimental writing, even allow them to transform those expectations – to envisage and act upon alternatives (see O'Brien (1994) for an example of a critical literacy project on reading and re-writing Mother's Day advertising catalogues).

Looking at samples of texts from a historical point of view can be revealing about how genres change. News reports, for example, have not always followed the 'inverted pyramid' model which modern readers are familiar with (where temporal sequence of events is reversed – the last occurring event appears first). Nineteenth Century new reports followed a more chronological narrative model, setting up a different relationship with 'the facts' of a story. Bell (1991) suggests that the move from one model to another was more than a stylistic . It was also a change in the role of the writer. It 'marks the movement of journalists from being stenographers recording events to being interpreters'. Such reading activities give students glimpses into the constructed and changeable nature of genres. Looking at language change in this way is not just a history lesson.

The perception of difference and change raises awareness of how textual practices, though shaped by conventions to the point where they might seem entirely 'natural', are actually subject to a range of social and cultural forces. Such erception can help students to orientate themselves in 'the changing landscape of communication' and contribute their own texts to it. It leads to a repertoire of textual possibilities, not text types.

3. Researching Genres as Practices

Genre can make a rich area of enquiry for students' own research. This research can focus on the texts and literacy practices of the home, of Literature, of the media, of technology, even of the classroom itself. Johns (1997) gives examples of students carrying out research on genres within disciplinary communities in faculty (ch. 6). This research is not confined to textual study. It involves interviewing teachers and students – those with a stake in the genres – and keeping journals of events and impressions. This kind of ethnographic research illuminates how genres are 'more than text'. It can show how texts play roles and construct relationships. It can show how texts are embedded in institutional life, communities and cultures. It can begin to reveal some of the politics which shape a genre – who writes it, who reads it, who does not, and why? How is it written, and why? How has it changed, and what might it be like in the future?

I have attempted to explain why new thinking about genre is relevant to English and literacy education. Analysing and researching genres, as one of the dimensions of learning about texts, can help students to shape and clarify their own writing choices and raise critical awareness of writing and other forms of communication and how they work in the world. It offers us one way of looking at language change and variety. At the same time, the concept of genre is clearly vulnerable to reductive views of literacy and instrumentalist views of writing education. To see genres in terms of dialogue rather than transmission, and as negotiated social practices rather than fixed rhetorical forms, offers us positive alternatives.

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